

selves can involve the unexpected. An internal investigation in a state-run maximum security prison examined the possibility that a staff member had collected artifacts from the prison farm, which happened to be located in an archeologically rich area featuring a continuum of habitation from Paleoindians to the arrival of Europeans.

Recently, a major success was achieved in securing the first conviction of relic hunters in southwest Virginia for looting Native American graves. Although the case began as an ARPA investigation, events required that the case be handled as a local prosecution. Thanks to the time crime program, the necessary resources were in place to help and encourage the prosecuting attorney. During the five years of the program, federal prosecutorial successes have multiplied in Virginia. In one of the most important ARPA cases to date, in October 1997, two men from Petersburg entered guilty pleas in federal court for illegally excavating artifacts from the Petersburg National Battlefield. Both men served prison sentences in this widely publicized case.

This case and other federal prosecutions have helped to legitimize the state effort.

Note

* The case was described in "Virginia Sends Message to Civil War Buffs," *Common Ground*, spring, 1997.

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DCJS is willing to share information on the time crime program, including a sample standard operating order for a law-enforcement agency on the topic, a checklist for archeologists who help process crime scenes, and more. For further information contact Robert Hicks, Crime Prevention and Law Enforcement Services Section, Department of Criminal Justice Services, 805 E. Broad Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219, 804-786-8421, or email <rhicks@dcjs.state.va.us>.

Liz Bauer and Carolyn Landes

Mesa Verde Collection Faces the Heat

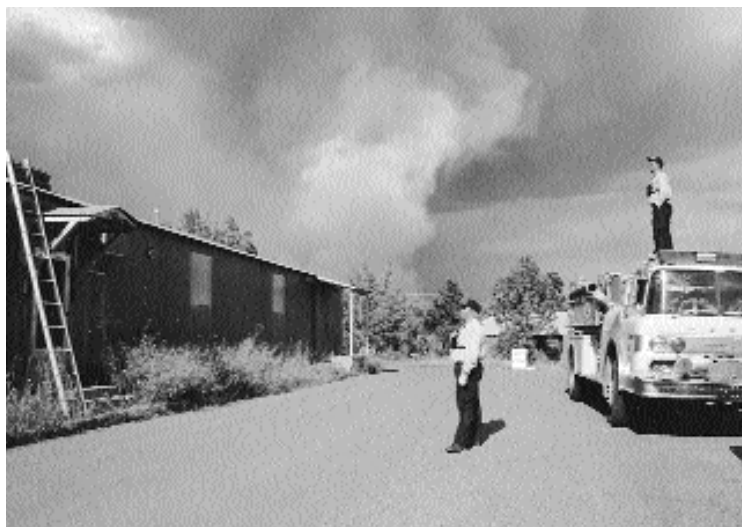
Wildland fires are a constant threat at Mesa Verde National Park. Three fires in the last four years have burned nearly half of the park. All developed areas have been threatened, some facilities have been damaged, and others have been completely destroyed. The fires since 1996 have come within 1 to 1 1/2 miles of the Research Center where the 2.9 million-object museum collection is housed. This irreplaceable collection documents not only the archeology (Ancestral Pueblo, AD 500-1300) of the park, but also the history and environment.

The Mesa Verde collections are currently housed in a 5,104-square-foot storage facility that was constructed nearly 50 years ago as a temporary archeological field lab. Conditions for proper storage are substandard. The building is not adequately sealed; insulation consists of deteriorating

fiberglass material attached to the ceiling with duct tape. The existing air conditioners and heating system do not maintain an adequate temperature, there is no humidity or zoned thermostat control, and the electrical system is insufficient to support the necessary computer hardware. The storage facility at Mesa Verde meets 29 (38%) out of the 76 standards listed on the NPS Checklist for Preservation and Protection of Museum Collections.

Threats from Fire

In addition to the Mesa Verde collections being at risk due to deficient storage conditions, uncontrollable wildland fires also seriously threaten them. Since 1996, three lightning ignited fires have burned 25,486 acres (49%) of the park's 52,000 acres. The 1996 Chapin 5 Fire started one mile north of the Research Center and burned 4,781 acres. During the summer of 2000, two fires burned within 1 1/2 miles of the



July 24, 2000, approximately 5 p.m. The Bircher Fire approaches the Mesa Verde Research Center from the east. Flames are less than two miles away as crews began to cover vents and windows with fire shelters. The park's collection of nearly three million artifacts and archives are stored in this metal building. Photo by Carolyn Landes.

Research Center. The Bircher Fire consumed 19,332 acres east of the Research Center. A week later, the Pony Fire devastated 1,373 acres west of the Research Center, including total destruction of all interpretive facilities on Wetherill Mesa. The island of green left by these two fires is where the Research Center is located.

There is only one road in and out of the park, which burned over several times during the Chapin 5 and Bircher fires. Park visitors and personnel were evacuated during times when the fires were less active. However, packing and moving 2.9 million objects and archives during extreme fire conditions was never considered a viable option.

The Fires of 2000

With wind and plume-driven flames of over 200 feet advancing toward Chapin Mesa and the Research Center, fire engines and crews were assigned to protect the structures during both fires. The Research Center, with its irreplaceable collections, was the number one protection priority.

Fire and park managers, working with park archeologists, first had to clear an area near the Research Center to provide a safe zone for fire crews and engines to retreat to in the event the fire overran the area. Due to the high concentration of prehistoric and historic sites within the park, this was the first time in decades that bulldozers were used in fire suppression activities at Mesa Verde.

The fire crews considered the metal-sided Research Center to be defendable from direct fire. To prepare for this defense, fire shelters were placed over roof vents, doors, and windows. Crews with chain saws and weed whackers worked to further reduce fuel loads around the

area. Fire engines were stationed at the Research Center and sprinklers were set up and activated around the Center's perimeter.

A fire-qualified curator was assigned to the structural protection crew to provide information and access to the interior of the building. The attic was full of boxes, shelves were stacked high with historic and prehistoric materials, aisles were blocked with supplies, and tables were full of projects, all of which would make interior fire fighting efforts a nightmare.

Other concerns included impacts from extreme heat build-up in the poorly air-conditioned structure, ground water seeping through foundation cracks from the exterior sprinklers, and leakage through the roof if it were necessary to water or foam the structure.

Once all preparations to defend the Research Center were completed, crews took a break and waited for whatever came next. In the case of the Bircher Fire, air attacks, hand-dug fire lines, and changes in fuel loads contained the fire before it crossed the last mesa to Chapin. In the case of the Pony Fire, these same factors and a fortuitous wind change sent the fire back toward the southwest. In both cases, a combination of hard work and a whole lot of luck kept Chapin Mesa and the Research Center from being lost.

Future Plans

With the fires of 2000 behind, efforts continue to improve conditions within the Research Center. A project has been approved to partially renovate the current facility. Renovation will include a new roof, sealing of the interior and exterior walls, and the installation of adequate heating, cooling, and electrical systems. Additional funding for three years has also been received to begin the process of storing artifacts according to professional standards.

These upgrades will substantially improve the conditions within the Research Center. However, the upgrades will not correct overcrowding issues, nor will they solve the continuing fire danger. The primary resolution is to move the collections to a new facility—one that is located and constructed not only to solve the wildland fire danger, but to also provide proper environmental controls and adequate storage, research, and work spaces. Planning for such a facility is currently underway.

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